

LANGUAGE POLICY IN EDUCATION: THE PRACTICALITY OF ITS IMPLEMENTATION AND WAY FORWARD

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ABSTRACT

Language is a critical tool that is used for the purposes of communication. Through it, we probe and elucidate various situations that we come across in our daily interactions. At the centre of the education system is the language policy in education which dictates the language used in disseminating knowledge at varied levels. Of concern to this study is the practicality of this policy with regard to the medium of instruction used at the various levels. According to Muthwii (2002), the language policy approved in Kenya entails a bilingual perspective in education where the child's first language (or the admissible local language) is used as the language of instruction in lower primary classes while English is taught as a subject. In the upper primary classes, English takes over from the first language as the language of instruction however the latter does not relish the same reverse role as English. The significance of local languages in the education system cannot be overlooked. This is because local languages are inimitable benefactors to social, political and economic development of any country. Nyika (2015) asserts that the use of a local language as a medium of instruction is beneficial across all the levels of education. He asserts that students whose mother tongue is used as the medium of instruction have an edge over those whose mother tongue is not used. He further notes that policies respecting the channel of instruction have both short and long term imputations some of which may easily go unnoticed yet they may have overarching consequences for current and future generations. Because of the impact of local languages, their use is entrenched in the Kenyan constitution of 2010 as stipulated in chapter 2, section 7(3) which notes the commitment of the state to: promote and protect the diversity of languages of the people of Kenya and to promote the development and use of indigenous languages, Kenya Sign language, Braille and other communication formats and technologies accessible to persons with disabilities. Despite the benefits that accrue from the use of local languages, they have not been given the attention they deserve in the Kenyan context in particular and the African continent generally. Most education systems in this continent give precedence to international languages despite the fact that the number of those fluent in these languages is minimal. The use of such languages in the education system pose far reaching consequences because there is a disconnect between what is formally taught and its applicability in its social domain. It is on this premise that this paper sought to investigate the extent to which the local language policy in education is implemented by teachers; to examine the challenges faced in the implementation of the local language policy and to describe practical solutions to the challenges faced in the implementation. The researchers argued from the premise that enhancement of local languages promote career development and open up avenues which can be used to achieve social integration, a concept that has been elusive in the Kenyan context. Interviews and Focus Group Discussions were carried out with the principal implementers. Secondary data in the form of books and journals were also utilized. The study found out that there

were challenges faced in the dissemination of information contained in the language policy in the local languages. In addition, there was need to give teachers opportunities to attend refresher courses with regard to teaching learners in mother tongue. Moreover, there was lack of training in translation a fact that contributed to the encumbrance that the implementers faced in implementing the local language policy.

Key words: Language, Multilingualism, Pedagogy, Constitution

Introduction

Language is an important tool in the society and this is best captured in Malinowski's assertion that 'language is the necessary means of communion: it is one indispensable instrument for creating the ties of the moment without which unified social action is impossible' (Diamond, 1959). Language serves a myriad of functions the basic of which is communication. It is a social product springing up with the first community, developing with the increasing needs of culture and sophistication and vanishing when society vanishes. Thus language happens to be the index of the progress of society and the longer a society exists the richer the language becomes' (Manindranath, 2000). The use of mother tongue as a channel through which knowledge is imparted cannot be trivialized. Fagerberg-Diallo (2006) demonstrates that learning to read and write in the language (s) used at community level triggers learners. They enable individuals participate and take leading roles in local institutions and organisations. Such persons encounter an important growth in credence for they establish businesses, manage local associations and community-based groups and take part in local political institutions. As parents, they give better parental support to the school going children.

There is a strong correlation between language and ethnicity. Language defines a community and through it members of the community conduct their businesses and interact with one another and the outside world. Fought (2006) notes that language and ethnicity are deeply interlaced. Language contributes to the social and psychological processes involved in the formation of ethnic identity. Ethnicity is seen as a social construction that indicates association with a particular group that is usually a minority within a country. Members of ethnic groups share common cultural attributes such as their language. Hence the bond between language and ethnicity puts the language that defines the community in this case the native one at the core of discussion.

Background information on the Language Policy

According to Association for the Development of Education in Africa (2005), the first mien of language policies in Africa dates back to the subdivision of Africa among the European powers in the 19thc. Besides the negative political and economic effects, these policies have had a major influence on education. Although history has made the European languages an irrefutable attribute of our linguistic terrain, it would be a blunder to believe that we can ever achieve practical development if we remain absolutely reliant on them. Rather we should encourage the co-existence of both African and European languages in our educational system, with priority given to the former. To achieve this, rigorous emendation needs to be done to the existing policies followed by their implementation.

A historical account of the Language policy in Kenya is crucial since it brings to perspective the interplay between English and the native languages and how they have shaped the language landscape in the country. Moreover, it takes note of how ‘the politics of language’ has played out and its effects on education. Nabea (2009) observes that the language policy in Kenya has its basis in the colonial language policy following the invasion and annexation of the African continent by European powers, which took place towards the end of the 19th century. After independence English was declared the official language a decision which Ngugi (1986) notes helped prolong neo-colonialism rather than help bring change. Several commissions (Ominde commission 1964; Gachathi 1976; Mackay 1980 among others) were initiated in order to inform the language policy but only a few recommendations made by such commissions were put to practice. English was thus considered as the language of official communication and was seen as illustrious as compared to the native languages. English was a status symbol for anyone who learnt it began abominating the peasant majority thereby becoming alienated from the values of his/her native language. Promoting English at the expense of local languages is therefore detrimental to the future of the Kenyan children.

Objectives of the study

This paper sought to address the following objectives

1. To investigate the extent to which the local language policy in education is implemented by teachers.
2. To examine the challenges faced in the implementation of the local language policy.
3. To describe practical solutions to the challenges faced in the implementation.

Benefits of using mother tongue as the medium of instruction

Any language can be used to achieve sophistication in any sphere of life. All languages have the ability of steering the cornerstones of any country which include the political, education, social and economic successfully. Tembe and Norton (2008) note that over the past two decades, a growing number of researchers have provided compelling support for the promotion of mother tongue education in the early years of schooling. They note that these researchers make the case that knowledge and skills achieved in mother tongue can transfer across languages and that multilingual children perform well at school when the school teaches mother tongue effectively. Using mother tongue as the medium of instruction in schools generally and in lower grades specifically has several strengths.

According to Fafunwa (1990), using a native language as a medium of instruction is beneficial since learners will have better understanding of the concepts taught than those who study in a foreign language. Wilhite (2003) also supports this assertion by arguing that using a language that learners use for their everyday interactions improves learning and aids in establishing a link with the local cultural contexts. It also helps in boosting a child's self esteem since he/she is made aware that his/her local language is not only valued but also acknowledged. Tomasevski (2003) points out that using a native language as a channel through which education is acquired satisfies the rights criteria of obtainability, attainability, sustainability and malleability. In sum, mother tongue enhances cultural identity. Through it children learn who they are, the history of their communities, their customs and beliefs. It also enables them to appreciate themselves as members of the society. It is only then that they can appreciate languages used in other communities.

Mberia (2016) notes that the use of native languages as the media of instruction in early formal education has several advantages to the child, community and to the country at large. For example, it allows for smooth change from home to school environment; the child is allowed to concentrate on one exercise which is the subject being taught rather than having to divide his/her attention and mental energies between the subject and the demands of a new language; the use and the early mastery of mother tongue have the effect of constructively advancing the role of the brain that is concerned with language and scientific experiments have shown that children learn better and faster when they communicate in their native languages.

These benefits far outweigh the vexations of addressing the problems of administering a policy using such languages as the media of instruction. Fishman (1968) argues that there is nothing in the composition of any language that impedes it from becoming a channel of modern enlightenment. Gacheche (2010) notes that the use of a familiar language to teach children literacy is more effectual than an immersion system as children are able to associate sounds with the symbols they see, thus facilitating comprehension. Moreover, the learning of new notions does not have to be delayed until the learners grasp the second language thus teachers and learners are able to broker meanings together, thereby achieving adroitness in the second language through mutual relation rather than memorisation and mechanical learning. Laitin and Ramachandran (2014:2) argue that ‘the choice of language influences human capital as it provides those who speak the official language of the state with greater access to economic and political opportunities. The greater the proportion of the population that speaks that language of instruction in schooling, the lower the cost and the higher the level of human capital in society.’ Development is made possible through a language that people understand best. In the case of Africans, it is their native languages. These languages should be used in both written and oral communication. If they are confined to the latter no tangible development can be realised and poverty will continue defining African states. These studies point out the advantages of using mother tongue as the medium of instruction, the present study supports the arguments fronted by these scholars and it is also interested in looking at the challenges that the principal implementers face while using the language policy and some practical solutions that can be used to address them.

Drawbacks of using mother tongue as the medium of instruction

Verifiable studies carried out by some scholars show that the use of mother tongue as the language of instruction has drawbacks. For example, Smits, Huisman and Kruijff (2008) posit that the use of local languages is twofold: it could unite ethnic groups or isolate the members from the dominant language speaking part of the population and limit them in their use of a society's lawful resources, including education. Benson (as cited in Smits, Huisman and Kruijff 2008) notes that in terms of educational attainment people who do not speak the language of instruction have less opportunity to understand enrolment procedures, communicate with school administrators or comprehend what is being taught. When in schools, the quality of education for these pupils is lower because they do not understand what is being taught. This leads to inequalities of opportunities. According to Muthwii (2002) mother tongue has been imposed for political and not for sociolinguistic or demographic reasons. Parents want their children to master English since it is the language of wider communication (Bergman, 1996).

In order to minimise the inequalities among languages, several governments developed mother tongue based education policies for learners in the lower grades. It has long been realized that educational results may be affected negatively if there is a difference between the languages that children speak and those used in the educational system. Despite the setbacks, the use of mother tongue as the language of instruction in lower grades has more strengths than weaknesses. Therefore, nations that are interested in developing their citizenry should make use of this policy in order to reap the benefits of civilization.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopted Cummins Proficiency theory (1979, 1991, & 2000). In this theory, Cummins makes a distinction between two differing kinds of language proficiency namely: Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) which are the 'surface' skills of speaking and listening and which are typically acquired quickly by many students; particularly by those from language backgrounds similar to English who spend a lot of their school time interacting with native speakers. The other is Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) which is the basis for a child's ability to cope with the academic demands placed upon him/her in various subjects.

Cummins (1991) believes that in the course of learning one language a child acquires a set of skills and implicit metalinguistic knowledge that can be drawn upon when working in another language. The common underlying proficiency thus provides the base for the development of both the first and the second language. It follows that any expansion of common underlying proficiency that takes place in one language will have a beneficial effect on other languages. Cummins further notes that it is very important that students be encouraged to continue their native language development and one of the ways in which this can be done is by parents assisting their children at home by providing them with opportunities to read extensively in their mother tongues. He also posits that parents should make some time every evening to discuss with their children in their native languages what they did at school. They should give their children time to explain in their native languages how they solved mathematical problems or conducted experiments in school for example. Cummins (2000) further postulates that ‘conceptual knowledge developed in one language helps to make input in other languages comprehensible.’ If a child already understands some concepts in his/ her language, all the child has to do is acquire the label of such notions in English. This theory is significant for the study since it brings to perspective the vital role that mother tongue plays in the academic life of a child. Through it different skills are acquired and the child’s ability to cope with various demands that are academic in nature is taken care of.

Methodology

Data was collected using an interview schedule and Focus Group Discussions. A total of thirty respondents participated in the research. Fifteen of them participated in the group discussions while the others were interviewed. A total of ten schools were sampled from two neighbouring constituencies of Uriri and Awendo in Migori County. The schools sampled from the former constituency were rural while those sampled from the latter were urban. All the teachers who participated in the study were native speakers of Dholuo and they were drawn from Dholuo-speaking school catchments. The pupils in the rural schools were native speakers of Dholuo thus this language was used as the medium of instruction while those in the urban schools were drawn from different communities such as Luhya, Kisii, Kuria, Luo and Somali. Because of this linguistic heterogeneity, Kiswahili, a lingua franca, was used as the medium of instruction from grade one.

The interviews and the Focus Group Discussions were conducted in English. These interviews were conducted with the teachers in their respective schools. As for the Focus Group Discussions, they were held at a central school for both groups of participants. The main aim of the research was to find out if the teachers implemented the Language policy in their schools, the strengths of the policy as well as the challenges that they faced in the course of implementing the policy. All participants in the study were lower grade teachers, the principal implementers of the policy. For this study, the points of reference were the reports of the commissions that had been vested with the responsibility of reviewing the language policy in education in post independent Kenya. They were: The Ominde Report (1964); Gachathi Report (1976); Koech Report (1999) and the Sessional Paper No. 14 of 2012.

Discussion

All the participants noted that the language policy which required that children be taught in mother tongue was vital since it made change from the home to the school environment smooth. Using a language that the learners were familiar with made them feel at ease and appreciated. Through mother tongue they learnt about their customs, beliefs and traditions as well as the history of their community. The teachers observed that even though the policy makers had good intentions for the learners, there was no uniformity in the implementation of the policy. The methods used varied depending on the comprehension of it by different teachers, the situations in which they found themselves in and the kind of learners that they had.

The teachers cited several challenges that impeded the effectual implementation of the policy. All of them decried the absence of varieties of teaching and learning materials in mother tongue. The materials that were available was insufficient, the curriculum developers failed to give a clear guide on how the instruction in the native languages was to be conducted and so the teachers were left with no option but to consult the curriculum that was written in English and which was meant for the upper primary and customize it to fit the mother tongue situation. In other words, the interpretation of the policy was at the discretion of individual teachers because of an ambivalent comprehension of it.

Most of the participants who taught in the rural as well as urban schools noted that they were not trained on mother tongue as a subject thus when they faced challenges they would code switch in the process of instruction thereby leaving the learners confused as to which language they were supposed to use in answering questions. Those teaching in the rural schools noted that there were some concepts especially those in the realm of the science that were difficult to explain in mother tongue because they did not know the words to use for them. One teacher had this to say:

There are some words that are foreign and some are not found in the immediate environment of the learners. They are innovations that have come about as a result of technological advancement. When we come across these words, we find it difficult to conceptualise what they could be and because we do not have dictionaries for example a Dholuo- English dictionary, we ourselves are not able to tell what they are in mother tongue or even give the learners equivalents of such terms or concepts. We scratch our heads to find examples to use in the classroom so that learners can have a rough idea of what such a word is but we fail. It becomes more frustrating for the teacher when he/she finds himself/herself in such a situation. Therefore, we resort to use an English word to explain to them such concepts. Such experiences are at times embarrassing for the teacher.

The status of native languages should be raised to enable it compete favourably with foreign languages. This argument is supported by Mbithi (2014) who notes that indigenous languages should be given official status and get assistance and motivation at all levels of the education system. Structures should be put in place to teach and scrutinize the capabilities of the indigenous languages used in Kenya. Such structures should include the resources to produce and disseminate instructional materials. Gacheche (2010) also supports this assertion by noting that the government can increase the functional uses of the native languages beyond the home so that as literacy in them increases, they attain substantial efficacy in the community. By so doing, the local languages become a valuable resource which thrives alongside global languages. Moreover, ameliorating the status of local languages will also refine the socioeconomic prospects and political involvement of a greater portion of the population.

The teachers in the urban schools argued that even though Dholuo was the language of the catchment area, the learners came from different communities and so the policy dictated that Kiswahili be used as the medium of instruction. Those teaching in the urban schools noted that not all of them used Kiswahili to deliver their content since some of them were not competent in the language. One of them had this to say:

Kiswahili is a difficult language. I can write it well but I have a problem speaking it. The language is demanding in terms of 'ngeli' and at times some learners correct you when you speak in it. Most of us Luos have a negative attitude towards Kiswahili and we prefer English instead since we speak it with ease. Personally, my handicap in Kiswahili language makes me resort to instructing the learners in English and at times I code switch. I know this is wrong but I do not have a choice. Since the learners come from the urban centre, they are conversant with the English language and they understand what is being taught in it. The government should offer us opportunities to attend refresher courses in the teaching of learners in mother tongue so that we can gain fresh insights. They should also provide us with adequate resources so that we are well equipped as implementers of the policy.

Even though all the teachers were native speakers of Dholuo, some of them were not competent in the language and this therefore acted as a barrier to its effective use in the classroom situation during instruction. Such teachers were burdened because they had to learn the language in the process of instruction and this made the process not only clumsy but also cumbersome. Because of the challenges that they faced, some of them resorted to code switching as a result. One of the teachers in the rural schools had this to say:

I was born and bred in Kawangware. My mother speaks Luganda and my father Dholuo so we used English in our house since my mother could hardly communicate in Kiswahili. We rarely interacted in Dholuo a situation that was compounded by the fact that the children in our neighbourhood came from different ethnic backgrounds so we used Kiswahili in our interactions. I trained in Machakos teachers college and I only came back home when I was looking for a job. My father encouraged me to come back to the village since it was easier getting an employment opportunity in the village than in Nairobi. The only time that I got to speak Dholuo frequently was in the village and here (in school). The first few months were very challenging for me because I had to deal with learners most of whom did not speak Kiswahili at all. I at times mix Kiswahili and Dholuo as I teach my learners in grade two.

The teachers had misgivings about using mother tongue to instruct the learners since they noted, it was not the language used in examination. They argued that this did a lot of harm to the learners. It was a waste of time, energy and resources. They noted that at the end of the primary education, examinations are set and done in English. Therefore, learners do not understand the essence of learning in mother tongue during their formative years because they do not have an opportunity to express themselves in the languages that were crucial in their academic foundations and which played vital roles in the comprehension of important concepts. The question that the teachers asked was: is it worth learning in a language that ceases to be useful once one completes lower primary, a language that is confined to the periphery and one that is devalued once one climbs the academic ladder? This issue was a point of concern for most of them. Failure to use mother tongue as a

language of instruction even though the policy demands so is best captured by Adegaju (2008) who notes that the use of mother tongue as the medium of instruction is not enforced at the level of implementation and to support this claim, he quotes Adegbite's (2003:188) assertion that the elite of the society are to blame for this situation:

Since it is the elite that dominate policy making in Nigeria, the interest of the elite has always been equated with public interest. Consequently, the dominance of English over the indigenous languages in Nigeria and the attendant positive attitude towards the language can be attributed to elitist interest.

The situation in Nigeria as is presented by Adegbite is replicated in Kenya. The policy on language is formulated in the boardroom and the interest of those to whom it is established is not fully taken care of. The situation on the ground in most cases is not taken into account during the inception as well as the implementation of such policies. Those concerned with ensuring that such policies are implemented (for example Quality Assurance Officers) do not make follow ups to ensure that the direct consumers benefit. They do not establish the weaknesses of such policies so that improvements can be made to ensure that the children benefit from such interventions. Coupled with negative attitudes and laxity that have been developed by the principal implementers towards this language policy, practical solutions need to be put in place if the interests of the African children particularly the Kenyan ones are to be taken care of.

The participants in the study noted that some parents especially those in the rural areas were stumbling blocks to the implementation of the policy. The parents argued that teaching children in their mother tongue was detrimental because such children could not compete favourably with their counter parts in the urban areas who were taught in English. To such parents, learning can only take place in English therefore the sole responsibility of the teachers was to teach the children different concepts in English and give them opportunities to express themselves in the same at a tender age. One teacher explained an encounter that she had with a parent representative after a stormy meeting at the school compound. This is what she reported:

The parents had resolved that their children be instructed in English rather than mother tongue because the exams done at the end of the primary education were set and administered in the English language. The parents thought that the decision to instruct the learners in their native language was the teachers' and not the Ministry's. The parent representative told me that parents did not kindly take that decision because according to them the teachers had already developed a

negative attitude towards their children and concluded that they were best suited for the village polytechnics after primary school the reason why they were taught in mother tongue. He further argued that had the teachers seen the potential in their children they would have taught in English which is the language of wider communication to give them a level ground to compete with their counterparts for positions in prestigious schools located in different parts of the country.

Obanya (1995) observes that there is an erroneous assumption that African languages are inadequate as such they cannot address scientific and technical entities. This may be one of the reasons why the parents in the rural school mentioned above had misgivings about the use of mother tongue as the language of instruction. Parents and other principal stakeholders need to be sensitized on the benefits of carrying out instructions in the child's home language in the lower grades so that certain misconceptions that are held are corrected.

Some teachers noted that since Kenya is a country where ethnicity is a sensitive issue, mother tongue should not be used as the medium of instruction in lower grades as it fuels ethnic divisions since at a tender age learners are made aware of their ethnic orientations and this makes them begin looking at themselves as different from those who come from other ethnic groups. Such groupings become more pronounced during the electioneering period when ethnicity becomes a major defining factor. Therefore, to achieve national cohesion a national language should be used as a medium of instruction in all schools across the country.

The participants concluded that the policy was good and it should be fully executed. However, the government should put more effort in improving it by coming up with a realistic and practical strategy to ensure that it is effectively implemented. Some suggestions given towards the improvement of the policy are: training the principal implementers on how to use the policy in service delivery so that there is uniformity in content dissemination for the benefit of the clients who in this case are the learners. Board of Management(s) should also sponsor early childhood teachers from their schools to neighbouring institutions which have successfully implemented the policies with good returns so that bench marking can be done and best practices from such schools be adopted. Quality assurance officers should regularly visit schools and offer guidance on areas that are problematic or even seek the services of specialists through their various county offices to assist the teachers.

Recommendations

First, communal effort is required among different stakeholders such as policy makers, scholars, implementers, education specialists and other advisors to tackle the challenges of implementing the mother tongue policy so that practical solutions can be sought. Second, adequate resources such as textbooks and reference materials such as dictionaries and encyclopaedias for all native languages need to be developed so that the learners and the teachers can have materials that they can make references to. Third, for those languages whose orthographies have not been developed those concerned should do so as a matter of urgency. Fourth, challenges should be documented and addressed by the concerned parties. Fifth, increased funding to support the implementation of the policy. Such funds can be used in training and in servicing programmes as well as in conducting research to help improve this policy. Sixth, supervision should be thoroughly done by concerned personnel to ensure that children reap the benefits of instruction in native languages. Seventh, introduction of the teaching of mother tongue as a subject alongside others in the teacher training institutions so that the teachers are well equipped to handle instruction in the native languages once in the field. Eighth, parents should be maximally involved in the education of their children. They should be encouraged to engage their children more in their native languages and they should assist them tackle assignments given in the said languages. In this way, they would help advance development of such languages as well as the concepts taught. Finally, services of resource persons in different native languages should be sought especially in the dissemination of oral traditions as a way of teaching the learners about their history and culture.

Conclusion

Instruction in mother tongue especially in the lower grades is key in the achievement of the goals of education. Therefore, it should be enhanced and advanced resources made available to the major implementers of the policy. Evidence has been provided on the benefits that accrue as a result of the use of native languages in dissemination of knowledge to learners. For instance, countries such as China, Japan and Russia do not instruct learners in English yet they have progressed greatly with regard to technology. In addition, there is merit in introducing a course on Translation and Interpretation in the Teacher Training Colleges because linguistic barrier is an impediment to the understanding as well as transmission of knowledge. As such, translation, an important component

in the comprehension process, should be given the attention it deserves if any benefits are to be attained in education. This course will be instrumental in ensuring that the language policy document in education among other vital ones is comprehended and the information contained therein effectively transmitted. The need for professional interpreters in the education system cannot be underestimated. This is because professional interpretation guards against incidences of misinterpretation that may lead to incorrect translations.

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